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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000968

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SUBJECT: EFFORTS TO SAVE ALGIERS ACCORDS ACCELERATE AS
BAHANGA RUNS AMOK

REF: A. BAMAKO 00960
[1](#)B. BAMAKO 00623

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga and members of his Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC) skirmished with Malian forces outside the towns of Nara and Goumbou on December 24, then camped on the outskirts of Mourdiah - approximately 260 KM north of Bamako - until December 27. Tuareg contacts in Bamako reported receiving telephone calls from ATNMC members with gleeful messages about being just around the corner. On December 27 and 28 ATNMC spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed issued statements claiming the ATNMC was monitoring the Kati-Nioro and Koulikoro-Nara roads. Although the Paris-based Sid'Ahmed is likely overstating the ATNMC's reach, a false report of an impending rebel attack in the western town of Niore on December 26 sent Malian soldiers and local residents scrambling for cover. Tuaregs and others are still assessing whether Bahanga is acting independently or receiving tacit support from Mauritania, AQIM, or others. Following Bahanga's deadly December 20 attack on Nampala (Ref. A) the newly emerging leader of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), National Assembly Deputy Alghabass ag Intallah, called President Amadou Toumani Toure and several senior Malian military officers to condemn Bahanga's actions and reiterate the ADC's commitment to the Algiers Accords. With the Tuareg rebel conflict rapidly escalating, representatives from Mali, Algeria and the ADC plan to meet in Kidal on December 30, to discuss - once again - the creation of mixed military units per the Algiers Accords. Alghabass ag Intallah and several influential actors in Bamako now seem to regard the mixed units as key to saving the Accords and undermining Bahanga. End Summary.

Bahanga at Large along Mauritanian Frontier

2.(C) On December 24 Tuareg rebels led by Ibrahim Bahanga clashed with Malian forces on the outskirts of Nara and Goumbou. Both towns are south of the Mauritanian frontier in the Malian region of Koulikoro. This is the first time Tuareg rebels have ventured into the central region of Koulikoro. The ATNMC's Paris-based spokesman and Bahanga father-in-law Hama ag Sid'Ahmed issued a statement on December 27 claiming to have destroyed two Malian army vehicles. The Malian army reinforcements encircling Nara reportedly prevent Bahanga from reaching the town. Mali also made a show of its two Hind-D helicopters, flying them over the skies of Bamako on December 25 for what was described as a routine reconnaissance operation. The Nara and Goumbou incidents produced no injuries, although the rebels reportedly made off with two stolen 4x4s and briefly detained two unfortunate passersby to serve as guides. One local

newspaper reported that several civilians traveling in a taxi bus near Nara were injured on December 26 when someone opened fire on the vehicle, but we have yet to confirm this information.

3.(C) From December 25-27 Bahanga and his group apparently camped near the town of Mourdiah, about 260 KM north of Bamako. Kidal Chamber of Commerce president Abdousalam ag Assalat told the Embassy on December 29 that he received telephone calls from members of Bahanga's group while they were camped in Mourdiah. Ag Assalat noted that the callers were using the local Malian cell phones as opposed to satellite phones and were therefore well within reach of Mali's cellular telephone network. Ag Assalat, who is in Bamako for the treatment of his ailing mother, said some rebels called him to ask after his mother's health and joke that they were now just around the corner, on the outskirts of Bamako. Ag Assalat said he believed Bahanga and his group left Mourdiah to return to Mauritania on December 28 because ATNMC members were once again using their satellite phones to call Tuaregs in Bamako.

4.(SBU) Heightened uncertainty and reports of Bahanga popping up in unexpected places triggered a December 26 security alert in the western town of Nioro just south of the Mauritanian border. One Malian newspaper described scenes of panic with shopkeepers closing their stores and Malian soldiers and local residents building barricades out of tires, rocks and pieces of wood. Contacted by the Embassy on December 29, the Prefect of Nioro, Lt. Col. Falle Tangara, attributed the alert to rumors emanating from Nara and the disappearance of two Tuareg soldiers from the Nioro military

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barracks. Both soldiers were integrated into the Malian army following northern Mali's 1991-1995 rebellion. On December 27 Nioro's mayor spoke on three local FM radio stations to reassure the population and run rumor control. Lt. Col. Tangara and Nioro's leader of Tidjani Muslims, Amadaou Tall, told the Embassy that as of December 29 Nioro was calm.

ADC Denies Involvement

5.(C) Following the Nampala attack, National Assembly Deputy and emerging ADC leader Alghabass ag Intallah called President Amadou Toumani Toure and senior Malian military leaders to denounce the Nampala attack, distance the ADC from Bahanga, and restate the ADC's dedication to the Algiers process. Alghabass called President Toure from the ADC's base in the mountains outside of Kidal.

6.(C) Some Tuareg rebels with shifting or dual loyalties to the ADC and ATNMC were involved in the Nampala attack. It does not appear that any of these individuals are under the ADC's control. One of the rebels wounded at Nampala and transported to the Mauritanian town of Fassala for treatment was reportedly an ADC member. The ADC's as yet still private condemnation of Bahanga, however, appears genuine. On December 24 one Bamako newspaper published an article linking Bahanga with the Mayor of the Mauritanian town of Bassikounou, which is just north of Nampala. On December 29 a different Bamako newspaper accused Mohamed Mahamoud Ould Sidi, identified as a former Mayor of Bassikounou and a narco-trafficker, of supporting Bahanga. The December 24 article gave the names of two Malian Tuaregs fighting with Bahanga: Mahdi ag Boghassa (aka Mahdi ag Boghada) and Malik ag Wanassnet. Bogada is an Idnane Tuareg based in Mauritania. Wanassnet, along with Ibrahim ag Banna, are both former ADC members who have since joined Bahanga. Wanassnet and Banna's participation in the Nampala attack could account for some of the reports regarding ADC involvement.

7.(C) There is a considerable amount of speculation among northern Malians over who is helping Bahanga. While Bahanga clearly has the capacity to attack the Malian military in Kidal, it would be difficult for him to operate for prolonged periods along the Mali-Mauritania border without some local assistance. The European Union, the U.S., Senegal, and Mauritanian military junta all issued statements of condemnation following Bahanga's Dec. 20 attack on Nampala. Despite the December 24 statement from Nouakchott, some in Mali believe Mauritania has found a friend in Bahanga. On December 24 ag Assalat told the Embassy that he suspects Mauritania is using Bahanga to exact revenge for Mali's refusal to seek accreditation for the new Malian Ambassador to Mauritania and the decision not to invite Mauritania to the November 2008 Ministerial Security Summit in Bamako. Ag Assalat said Mauritania facilitated Bahanga's return to northern Mali from Libya one month ago, and that Bahanga traveled by air from Tripoli to Nouakchott on a Mauritanian passport to meet with senior Mauritanian officials. Ag Assalat told the Embassy that Bahanga has no Malian passport and had once asked ag Assalat to help him obtain one, but ag Assalat refused. Ag Assalat said a Mauritanian government vehicle drove Bahanga to the Malian frontier after his meetings in Nouakchott in November 2008.

8.(C) Others suspect Bahanga is receiving support from Berabiche Arabs living in the region of Timbuktu. Bahanga has on occasion met with Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed, a former Berabiche rebel leader who co-founded the Arab Islamic Front for the Azawad (FIAA) during the rebellion of the 1990s and is now resident in Nouakchott (Ref. B). A former school teacher in his late 60s or early 70s, Ould Sidi Mohamed is hardly a rebel type. He is still clearly devoted to greater autonomy for northern Mali, however, and seems to regard Bahanga as legitimate voice for northern Mali rather than a self-interested bandit turned narco-trafficker. Although Sidi Mohamed is somewhat out of the loop as far as contemporary rebellions in northern Mali are concerned, he may still have some pull with Malian Arabs. Sidi Mohamed accompanied the Tuareg rebel delegation that met with Minister of Territorial Administration, General Kafougouna Kone, in Algiers in July 2008, much to the chagrin of Minister Kone.

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9.(C) Still others believe Bahanga may be moving closer to members of AQIM. On December 26 Moulaye Danna, a local Berabiche leader based in Timbuktu, called the Embassy to state that Tuareg rebels associated with Bahanga were meeting with AQIM at a village on the Malian side of the Mauritanian border north of Timbuktu.

Comment: Managing Bahanga Through Mixed Units

10.(C) Bahanga's foray into the regions of Segou and Koulikoro in central Mali constitute a significant threat to the viability of the Algiers framework. Many have interpreted Bahanga's end run around against the Malian military and civilian population via the region of Timbuktu and Mauritania as a declaration of war. The attacks also cast a darker shadow over Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghali's role as many in Mali see a link, whether real or imagined, between ag Ghali's return from Saudi Arabia and Bahanga's decision to fire away. Either Bahanga is beyond ag Ghali's control - a development which is difficult to believe given ag Ghali's role within the Tuareg rebellion - or ag Ghali quietly approved of Bahanga's actions for reasons that remain unknown. Either way, ag Ghali is appearing to be more part of the problem than part of the solution.

11.(C) The good news, if there is any, is that Malian officials have resisted attempts to lump Tuareg rebels loyal to the ADC - apparently now led by Alghabass ag Intallah - in with those responsible for attacking Nampala and harassing local populations in Nara, Goumbou, and Mourdiah. Alghabass's emergence as the ADC's resident leader in Mali, thereby displacing ADC spokesman and fellow National Assembly Deputy Ahmada ag Bibi, is also a welcome change. Unlike ag Bibi, whose role as ADC spokesman is due in large part to prior service as one of ag Ghali's business partners in a Kidal based tourism agency, Alghabass has the pedigree and charisma needed to lead Malian Tuaregs of the Adrar des Ifoghas. Alghabass also apparently seems to understand the utility of creating mixed military units, both in terms of the tangible fulfillment the Algiers Accords and also as a public relations move capable of neutralizing Bahanga.

12.(C) Malian and Tuareg leaders have repeatedly told the Embassy that there is no viable military or judicial solution to Bahanga, and that a political settlement - preferably entailing Bahanga's assignment to a far-flung Malian Embassy or consulate provided there is a country willing to accept him - is the only option. A mixed military unit with the potential to draw in some of those supportive of Bahanga could set the stage for this kind of settlement. Members of the Algiers Accords steering committee are planning on meeting in Kidal, together with Alghabass and ag Bibi, on December 30 to discuss, once again, the creation of one or more mixed military units. Several independent observers in Bamako - including former Minister of Defense and Head of State Security Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga - have reportedly urged President Toure to revisit the mixed military units, arguing that these units are the key to saving the Accords and undercutting Bahanga. Some of their suggestions reportedly entail asking the European Union, France, and the United States for rapid assistance in standing up one or more mixed units.

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